



# Mc Dougall's Good Stories for Children



## David Burney's Strange Interest in Learning the Language of the Animal World and How it Brought Fame and a Fortune

**I** DO NOT believe that at any time or in any place there ever was a boy who pursued so strange and apparently as unprofitable a study as David Burney did, and yet the result was quite as beneficial to him as if he had studied Hebrew, trigonometry, acoustics, genealogy, archaeology, pyrotechnics, palmistry and half a dozen others just as difficult to master.

In ancient times, when it was very common, indeed, to see boys studying with alchemists, astrologers and alleged wizards, such a course as David took might not have seemed so very odd, but nowadays it would be nearly impossible to find another lad who had undertaken the language of animals and birds. Such was the remarkable learning which he acquired in this branch of science that he understood what every creature was saying, no matter whether it was an elephant, a cow-bird, a turtle or a cockroach.

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He learned all this from a poor, obscure old man who lived in a hovel in the Allegetto mountains in Italy, a man who was supposed by the inhabitants of that region to be half crazy and who lived almost as simply and poorly as any wild denizen of the forest, but who, once in a while, when he took a fancy to a lad, would impart his wonderful knowledge to him for a small sum of money. But unless the boy was very bright, persevering and steady he seldom wasted much time on him. David was all these and more, for his memory was so wonderful that he never forgot anything he heard and old Mr. Granini, the hermit of the mountains, was so charmed with his gentleness, his cleverness and his studious habits that he taught him all that he knew.

"What's the use of learning animal-talk? You can't sell hats, shoes or neckties to pigs, goats or rabbits!" said David's Uncle Henry, who had a notion store in the country. "You'd better learn Russian or Filipino and make a dollar or two."

"There are other things in the world than money," replied David. "I wish to learn the habits of animals so that I can impart the knowledge to mankind."

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"Bosh!" cried his uncle. "Who cares to know what time of night the elephant goes to bed, or whether bears snore or mice have fits? All this animal business is overdone."

"Suppose I learn how to raise seals so that we can get more seal-skins?" asked David.

"Well, perhaps there would be some sense in that," replied Uncle Henry, "but you will most likely spend your time writing down the smart sayings of guinea-pigs or what stories wart-hogs tell in the forest. I know these naturalists and what they like to dig up about animals."

"Well, perhaps I'll find a way to make a little money, after all," said David. As Uncle Henry had helped to pay for his schooling, David thought that he ought to make some return for the outlay.

So without telling him about the many remarkable things which the boy learned, and the conversations which he held with all sorts of animals that are considered dumb and senseless, how his dog and cat told him the most wonderful tales and how the birds in the trees and shrubs sang such songs to him, that he was constantly writing down all that he heard. He will simply relate how he made a great deal of money in a most peculiar manner and completely satisfied Uncle Henry that it was very profitable to learn the language of animals.

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David had been talking with several cats, rats, owls and moles about their marvelous ability to see in the dark, and although they tried to make him understand, he could not comprehend why they should be able to see what was quite invisible to him. Meeting a rabbit one afternoon, he brought the subject up and asked the cotton-tail how he managed to dodge the low-hanging branches and stumps when running at full speed through the darkest forest.

"I suppose I do just as you would yourself," replied Bunny. "I see them and duck or dodge in time to avoid hitting them."



DAVID AND HIS ANIMAL FRIENDS

"But I don't see them!" exclaimed David. "Not at night. I never know a branch is there until it whacks me on the nose!"

"Can't you see it shining, just as bright as moon-lit snow?" asked the rabbit in wonder.

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"Shining! Do the trees, rocks and things seem to shine?" cried David, as the new thought came to him.

"Seem! Why, they do shine; there's no 'seem' about it!" responded Bunny, wriggling his nose in surprise. "It's as plain as day!"

Now, David had of late been reading about the wonderful properties of certain metals which radiate light in the darkest room, which is totally invisible to a human eye, but which is so plain that a photographic plate in a camera sees it and a picture is taken by it that plainly shows objects nearby. It seems as if the metal stored up the sunshine and let it ooze out by degrees, just as ice melts.

David came to the conclusion, after consulting with all of his night-prowling animal friends, including the fox, skunk, mink, mouse and mole, that almost every substance has this power of storing sunlight in various degrees and releasing it at night, but the eyes of many animals, not being so well adapted to seeing in the dark, do not perceive any more than we do this glowing radiance.

"I now know," said David to his father, "how the mosquito can sail right at you in the dark and land on the one spot where you are not prepared to swat him."

"Yes, and I can see now how a cat can walk a fence and dodge a bootjack or a brick!" said his father. "I wish I could manage to see the path and the front steps the same way some nights," he added, thoughtfully.

"Yes," said David's mother, "and how lovely it would be to get up in the night and walk around the room without knocking chairs and tables over! I wish we could do it!"

"Fish, tush!" cried Uncle Henry. "What's the use of all this, except to show that animals don't have gas bills to pay. Find out how to discover some buried treasure, and your learning will be of some use."

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A few days after this conversation the Burney family went to the seashore for the summer, and David was delighted, as there would be opportunities to converse with new animals, such as fish, crabs, lobsters, clams, oysters, starfish and a myriad others. He spent all of his time on the beach, and people seeing him lying on the wet sand with his ear close to a recumbent clam often thought the boy demented; but he was learning all the submarine lore of the ocean.

Seahorses told him of their races, oysters sang deep-sea songs to him, fiddler crabs taught him new melodies hitherto undreamed of; dogfish revealed how they hunted the sea wolves, chased the sea urchins and scared the sea cows so that their milk soured; starfish gave him totally new ideas of astronomy, and sea spiders revealed how they existed without weaving any webs in the deep. Every day he learned some new facts, and finally he came upon the treasure that satisfied Uncle Henry.

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One morning he arose at daybreak and went to the shore to meet some plover and sandpiper, but he had scarcely approached the beach before he saw a new object. Something huge and black loomed up at the water's edge, and, hastening hither, he saw that an enormous whale lay stranded in the shoal water.

"What is the matter?" he inquired as he hastened to the monster, whose great, broad head was high and dry on the sand.

"Matter?" gasped the whale. "The matter is that I am dying."

"Why don't you make an effort and get into deep water before the tide gets any lower?" asked David in great concern.

"What's the use?" replied the cetacean. "I am so sick that I care not whether I am afloat or stranded. I am going to die, and I might as well do it here."

"What is wrong?" inquired the boy

## Why Animals, Birds and Insects Can See at Night—The Mys- teries of the Sea and the Fortune Hidden in a Whale's Stomach

It gives me heartburn sometimes, but that's not what ails me now."

Now, David knew that ambergris is one of the most valuable of substances, a lump as big as one's head being worth thousands of dollars, and this lump was five or six times as large. He was delighted at securing this treasure, worth probably fifty or sixty thousand dollars, but he laid the waxy, repulsive-looking lump on the sand and hastily re-entered the whale's throat.

Arriving once more in the stomach, where it was as dark as in his own cellar at midnight, he was proceeding slowly and cautiously along, when he came in contact with something hard. Then, more than ever before, he wished for a bat's or an owl's eyes, but he felt in all of his pockets, and at last found one match. Lighting it cautiously, he discovered that the hard object was a great iron-bound chest, rusty and covered with great barnacles. It had become quite firmly imbedded in the flesh of the whale's stomach, which showed that it had been there a long time.

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He was quite sure this was what ailed the monster, and he went out and told him so. The whale reflected a moment and then said:

"You're right. Ever since I swallowed that thing off the coast of South America more than three hundred years ago I've felt that something was wrong. It had no taste, and I thought it was harmless, although it felt heavy on my stomach. I suppose it will be the death of me."

"No," said Henry. "I'll get a rope and tie it around it, and then fasten the other end to a tree, after which you must make a desperate effort and back off into deep water. That will fetch it up in a jiffy."

"All right. Go and get the rope. I can get off easily enough," said the whale.

Henry ran home and got a stout rope a hundred and forty feet long. Fastening one end to a big tree, he hurried down to the whale's stomach, where he lighted a candle and proceeded to tie the rope firmly about the great chest. When that was done he came out and told the whale that he must do the rest.

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But it was a dreadful task. It was like pulling a tooth to dislodge that chest, but finally up it came as the whale backed off and tugged at the rope like a fish on the hook. The chest rolled out on shore, and the whale eyed it with angry glances, but he said:

"That was it. I feel better already, and I am a thousand times obliged to you, but now, as the tide is getting pretty low, I must be moving off, or I'll be high and dry indeed. Good morning."

Then he flopped and floundered until he got into deep water, and with a final wave of his tail, dived and vanished.

Henry got his father's horse and wagon, and long before other people were out of bed he had the chest home. There he opened it without much difficulty, as the locks were completely rusted away. And what do you suppose was in it?

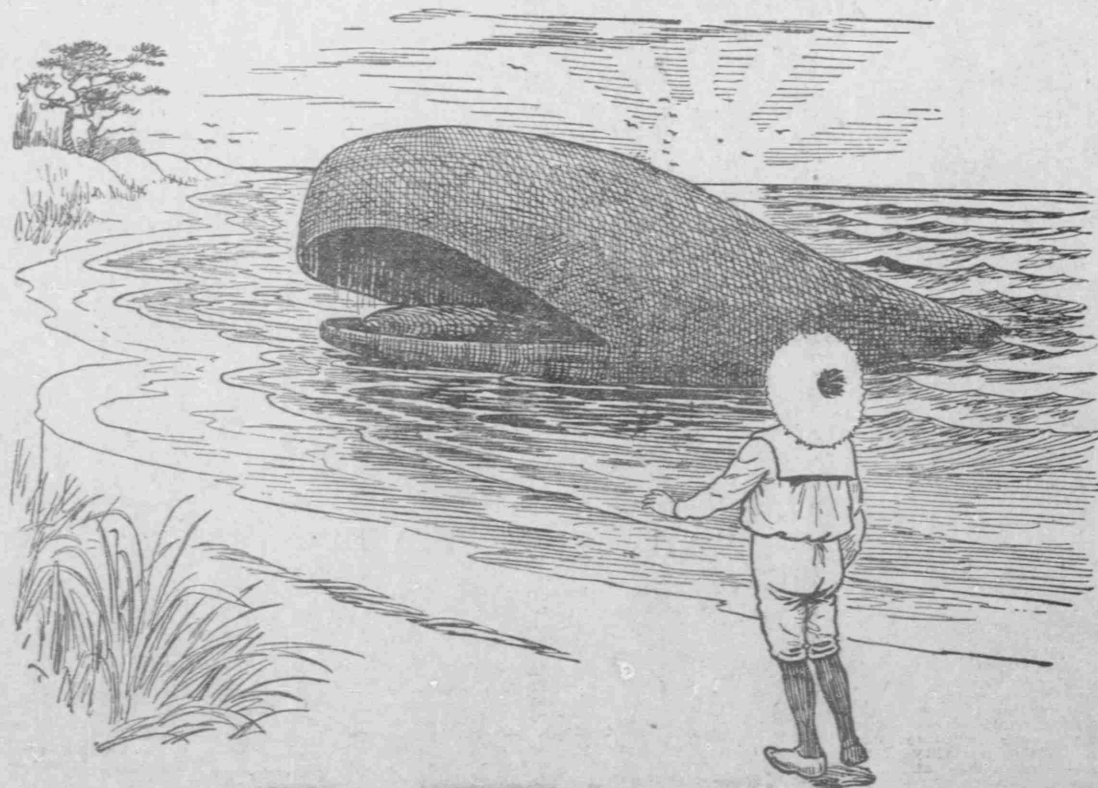
It was full of gold doubloons, out of some ancient galleon of Spain, heaped to the very lid with gold, and also scattered in among the coins were many gleaming gems of great value.

Uncle Henry's eyes popped when they told him about the ambergris, but they nearly sprang out of their sockets when they next showed him this great treasure chest, and he then and there apologized to David for his unbelief and offered to take him in partnership in his business.

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But David declined, and while he gave Uncle Henry about half a million dollars out of gratitude he decided to keep right on studying the animal tongues and learning animal habits, in spite of the fact that he was so awfully rich that he need do absolutely nothing but ride in merry-go-rounds or shoot the chutes or something like that from morning until night if he desired. And he enjoys his studies just as much as you would enjoy looping-the-loop or any amusement you can mention, so he is perfectly happy.

WALT MCDUGALL.



DAVID DISCOVERS THE WHALE



THE STARFISH TEACHES HIM ASTRONOMY